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Germany after the Elections:
Implications for Germany, Europe and U.S.–German Relations

If Angela Merkel had her way as Chancellor, she would leave the cornerstones of German foreign policy untouched, but alter its tone and most importantly the delicate balance of Germany's vital relationships. In short, the ingredients of Merkel's preferred foreign policy would include:

– less France and more United States
– less Russia and more Poland
– no EU-Membership for Turkey

But Angela Merkel will not have her way, at least not completely. And if change does come, it is not likely to be announced with fanfare. Indeed, there are several domestic constraints on Merkel's agenda. If elected Chancellor by the Bundestag, she will be leading a grand coalition that includes the most important component of the current government, the center-left Social Democrats. While Merkel and her center-right Christian Democrats want to engineer some changes, their Social Democrat partners will see to it that she guarantees enough continuity in policy areas dear to them. The Social Democrats will want to protect what they regard as the core foreign policy achievements of the current Schröder government. At the same time, Social Democrats will likely work hard not to be seen as obstructionists inside the coalition. However, the very nature of such a grand coalition creates constraints. It is governance by perpetual conference committee -- probably somewhat instable, transitional in nature, with a limited agenda focused on domestic policy. It will lack a clear mandate for a distinct foreign policy agenda. In such a volatile political climate, public opinion may become another source of constraint on policy makers.

This situation poses a particular challenge to American foreign policy: How does one deal with a German chancellor who wants less change than many in Washington hope for, yet more change than she can implement or even advocate for?

I will try to address all three topics here: first, the approach to foreign policy that Angela Merkel and her conservative advisors favor; second, the grand coalition and the domestic constraints on it; and third, the resulting challenges for American foreign policy. In addition, I will offer a few observations about the personalities involved.

1. The Foreign Policy Agenda of German Conservatives

a. Less France, more United States

When Angela Merkel appeared before the media to announce that talks with the Social Democrats had led to the decision to form a grand coalition under her leadership, she briefly outlined the agenda of the new government. She mentioned foreign policy only in passing, citing only one such agenda item: to improve the relationship with the United States. There is, of course, a deeper meaning to this brief announcement. It is the central importance that she attaches to this relationship. Indeed, the rest of her agenda revolves around it.

Merkel's Christian Democrats built their foreign policy on a long tradition of Atlanticism, initially with the first West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, who helped bring West Germany into the Atlantic Alliance, and most recently with Helmut Kohl, who cooperated with the first President Bush to negotiate German unity within NATO. The tradition of Atlanticism in Merkel's party is alive and well. But during the post-9-11 years German conservatives faced a double irritation.

It seemed only normal to Christian Democrats (and consistent with NATO's common defense clause) that the Alliance offer help to the United States after the attacks of 9-11. To their surprise, this help was rejected. Building the response to terrorism on coalitions of the willing rather than on NATO confounded conservatives. The run-up to the Iraq War found the majority of Christian Democrats, who had after all been the stalwarts of German Atlanticism, in the mainstream of public opinion -- which became increasingly critical of the Bush administration's plans for war. Few Christian Democrats publicly supported the war; some openly opposed it; many simply remained silent; hardly anyone advocated a military contribution to the war effort. The war itself has only hardened those positions. And the fact that no weapons of mass destruction have been found has rendered the war indefensible even to the most ardent German Atlanticists. To this day, Christian Democrats do not advocate German military contributions to stabilize Iraq, even though they regard a stable Iraq as in the interest of Germany. There would be no majority for such a policy within the party, within the Bundestag, or among the German public. Such a proposal would definitely lead to the collapse of the governing coalition.

The second irritation for conservatives was Chancellor Schröder's reaction to the changed American behavior in the run-up to the Iraq war. Christian Democrats regarded his stance as overblown and contrary to vital German interests. While many agreed with Schröder's characterization of the war as "an adventure," they were puzzled by the attempt to form a coalition of the unwilling with France and Russia. While many Christian Democrats believe President Bush's strategy to build a coalition of the willing has helped to split Europe, they also believe that Schröder's "coalition of the unwilling" has exacerbated the problem. Specifically, they contend that it forced Europe's smaller nations to decide between the two blocks. Angela Merkel has, on numerous occasions since 2003, criticized Schröder for giving up Germany's balance between Atlanticism and Europeanism as well as its traditional position as a mediator in the middle of Europe.

In the post-1989 environment Christian Democrats see two vital interests for Germany. First of all, they advocate strengthening the European Union by promoting further integration. German Christian Democrats are soundly rooted in Europe's federalist camp: Helmut Kohl was one of the architects of the Euro. Conservative foreign policy experts Karl Lamers and Wolfgang Schäuble invented the controversial idea of a "core Europe" that would speed up its integration process while others would be allowed to lag behind. Christian Democrats supported the European Constitution that the Dutch and the French electorates rejected. They now favor "rescuing" those parts of the project that can be salvaged. In this type of Europeanist thinking, a policy that does not use German power to avoid splits in Europe is contrary to the core national interest of the country.

Conservatives see the trans-Atlantic relationship as Germany's second vital national interest. In their thinking NATO remains Germany's security guarantee, especially in an age of terrorism. Beyond the security partnership, the United States is seen as the guarantee power for Germany's first national interest: European integration. That is why President Bush's reaffirmation of America's commitment to a strong and united Europe (during his visit to Brussels earlier this year) has been greeted with a sigh of relief by German Conservatives. It helped rebuild Atlanticism inside the party and led to a more pointed critique of Schröder's foreign policy and to the rationale for the recalibration of German foreign policy under conservative leadership. As Karl-Heinz Kamp, one of Merkel's foreign policy advisors, puts it, Germany must try to "return to trans-Atlantic balance". In Kamp's view, "Mr. Schröder's shift towards Paris has destroyed this equilibrium and impaired the international weight of Germany." Only in a "mediating role" Germany can "exert a large degree of influence in the European Union." Kamp, security policy coordinator at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, also asserts: "Germany can and will loosen itself from the French grip without becoming blindly obedient to Washington." Inside NATO, Kamp wants Germany to "cease applying the brake" and instead "direct its political energies toward the further development of the alliance." A new German government, Kamp declares, "will promote the development of a European security identity founded on European-Atlantic synergy, rather than one focused on European emancipation from American dominance in the political, economic and military spheres". However, these words represent "pure" conservative foreign policy thinking. They were written before the grand coalition became a political necessity.

b. Less Russia, more Poland

Correspondingly, Christian Democrats feel uneasy about what they see as an all-too-cozy relationship with Russia. Vladimir Putin has been Chancellor Schröder's best friend on the international stage – a personal relationship that paid off for both countries, Schröder claims. Schröder and Putin have met countless times. For orthodox Christmas 2001, they attended a service in Moscow. For his 60th birthday, Schröder invited Putin to his home in Hanover as the only foreign guest. Putin understands German. His daughters went to German School in Moscow. Schröder has adopted a Russian girl. Both leaders come from a humble background. They moved up the social ladder in their respective societies. They are, as one Schröder advisor puts it, "brothers in biography".

Russia and Germany have cooperated in the conflict with terrorism and in the conflict with President Bush over Iraq. All the while, Schröder has abstained from criticizing the growing democracy deficit in Russia. At the heart of the strategic partnership, however, is energy policy. In 2003, no less than 38 % of German natural gas imports were supplied by Russia. New joint explorations of gas fields in northern Siberia have recently been agreed upon. Shortly before the German election, Chancellor Schröder and President Putin announced that a new natural gas pipeline would be installed on the bottom of the Baltic Sea, not coincidentally circumventing Lithuania and Poland. As German foreign policy analyst Michael Thumann writes, Mr. Schröder has made "a choice for his country: in energy affairs, he focuses solely on Russia." Schröder's "distinctive brand of Ostpolitik," Thumann goes on to write, "represents a clear break with West Germany's foreign policy traditions since 1949."

Christian Democrats wish to re-balance Germany's Russia policy. In October 2004, Angela Merkel chided Schröder for a policy that "increases Germany's dependence on Russian natural gas beyond a prudent limit." While a clean break with this policy is unlikely because of German energy needs, a conservative government would like to pursue a diversification strategy. German conservatives, rooted in the realist school of foreign policy thinking, are unlikely to start confronting Russia about questions of democracy inside Russia. However, Chancellor Merkel's relations with the Russian leader are unlikely to be as personal as those of her two predecessors. Helmut Kohl even went to the sauna with Boris Yeltsin. Conservatives attribute Kohl's closeness to him to the demands of a unique historical situation rather than with a more general strategic analysis. That unique situation, they contend, was the fall of the Berlin wall, German reunification, and the fact that Russian troops remained stationed on German territory for years even after reunification. Conservatives point to the fact that Kohl managed to balance this relationship with President Yeltsin with a close relationship to President Bush and unwavering support of Polish membership in the European Union. It is this lack of balance that Christian Democrats criticize today. As Wolfgang Schäuble, Merkel's most experienced foreign policy advisor, put it in June 2005, there will be no more special relationship, just good relations.

The conservative notion that the Schröder government disturbed the balance of Germany's vital relationships extends to relationships with the smaller countries in Europe -- even with Poland, the biggest of the smaller nations. Being the most populous and economically most powerful country in the EU, West Germany had initially met some skepticism from its neighbors when it assumed a leadership role inside Europe. The burden of the Nazi past also played its part. Consecutive governments have successfully addressed these concerns by making Germany a champion of smaller EU countries. The conservative critique of the Schröder government claims that Schröder has diminished German influence in Europe by neglecting those smaller countries. According to this thinking, Poland has been unnecessarily alienated by the Schröder government's cozy relationship with President Putin's Russia. As the Adenauer Foundation's Karl-Heinz Kamp writes about a prospective conservative government: "By showing respect, Germany will win back the small countries within the EU whose trust was lost over the

last few years."

c. No EU-membership for Turkey

Ever since the EU started talking about possible Turkish membership some 40 years ago, German conservatives have had misgivings about this prospect. Chancellor Helmut Kohl voiced them most prominently and bluntly when he said that Europe "is a Christian Club". Christian Democrats argue that Europe has borders. They see Turkey outside of these borders. They mention cultural incompatibility. And increasingly they claim the EU is not ready for a big country like Turkey. Instead of exporting stability, the EU would import instability. Under Angela Merkel's leadership as party chairman, Christian Democrats have committed to derailing the membership process. They insist that the process is "open-ended" and hope that in the end Turkey will not meet the EU membership criteria. And even if Turkey were to qualify, they express confidence that the French and some other European electorates which have to approve of Turkish membership will ultimately resist. As an alternative to membership, Merkel proposes what she calls a "privileged partnership." However, under criticism from Social Democrats (who support Turkish membership) Ms. Merkel has a hard time explaining how a "privileged partnership" improves the current legal status of Turkey vis-a-vis the European Union.

2. The Grand Coalition and Domestic Constraints

Grand coalitions are transitory in nature. All participants know that a grand coalition is not a long-term governing project. The stability of this particular grand coalition seemed to be guaranteed by the fact that all three party chairpersons (the Social Democrat as well as his colleagues from the two conservative sister parties) committed their own careers to the project by becoming cabinet members. Yet about a week before this testimony, political upheaval left only one chairperson as a cabinet member. That person is Angela Merkel, the prospective Chancellor. This turn of events adds to the doubt that a stable coalition with a forceful agenda is in the making.

A feature of any German coalition is the tradition that the larger partner names the chancellor, while the smaller partner names the foreign minister. In a grand coalition, however, the office of the Foreign Minister may be used to groom a prospective party leader, possibly a future chancellor. That may create a sense of rivalry between the chancellor and her most important cabinet member. It also means that the chancellor of a grand coalition has a hard time forcing her foreign policy agenda on the partner (which has happened numerous times under conventional coalition governments).

Grand coalitions work well in foreign affairs when they have a distinct policy project. That was the case in the first Grand Coalition (1966-1969), which paved the way for detente. In the absence of such a project, grand coalitions have to rely on time-tested policy traditions. That is the case here. The cornerstones of German foreign policy enjoy multi-partisan support. They remain European integration, trans-Atlantic security,

partnership in NATO, promotion of rules-based multilateral conflict resolution, and military engagement in the Balkans and Afghanistan -- but not in Iraq. Beyond these fundamentals Ms. Merkel's agenda of "re-balancing" Germany's relationships will be part of day-to-day governing. It was also part of the coalition negotiations. (They are ongoing at the time of this writing. The foreign policy portion is completed and not yet public.) But Christian Democrats did not insist on putting every word of Merkel's agenda into writing. They tried to avoid provocations to their new coalition partner. As one observer joked, conservatives wanted to see a lot of NATO in the document, while Social Democrats wanted to read about peace. Most likely, they both will be satisfied.

But the real issues were debated. First among them: Turkey. Here the partners disagree on principle. Social Democrats want Turkey inside the EU, Conservatives do not. During the negotiations they agreed to disagree and leave the issue to the future. That is easy to do, because the European Union has only recently agreed to start membership talks. The new coalition will not have to take responsibility for that decision. Membership negotiations will likely conclude in ten years – beyond the half-life of this coalition.

Social Democrats do not agree with the conservative critique that Germany's relationships with Europe's smaller countries have been strained under their watch. But they do agree with the underlying principle that Germany should exert influence by championing the causes of smaller nations. That makes it easy for them to agree to Merkel's proposition: work more closely with Poland and smaller countries. Likewise, Social Democrats do not agree that Germany has been too close to Putin's Russia. But they do agree that Germany should not become overly dependent on Russian energy. While conservatives will probably not insist on annulling the treaty on the Baltic natural-gas pipeline, Social Democrats will not complain when the new chancellor behaves in a more business-like manner than her predecessor. It is in questions of style and tone where Chancellor Merkel will have her wiggle room. But of course over time style easily translates into substance.

This is also true when it comes to German-American relations. Social Democrats agree to build on the improvements of the last year. While Chancellor Schröder's foreign policy has had little or no opposition from inside his party, some found the strained personal relations between Chancellor Schröder and President Bush unfortunate and unnecessary. They regret the demise of Gerhard Schröder, but welcome the opportunity to overcome differences with new players. Social Democrats and Christian Democrats can find common ground on these questions because their leaders are foreign policy realists. However, there is a gulf between the policy elites and a sizeable segment of the population. Public attitudes and perceptions may well become a constraining factor, especially in an inherently unstable grand coalition.

Chancellor Schröder's foreign policy has been wildly popular because a large majority of Germans believe he got the big questions right. He sent German soldiers to Kosovo and Afghanistan, but kept them out of Iraq. He abandoned the post-war notion that the German military should be used only in pure self-defense. At the same time, he seemed to show that decisions about the use of the military would be made on a case-by-case

basis. He would cooperate with the United States when prudent and stand up to the US when necessary. The key word of this policy is "normalization". The public does not want Angela Merkel to abandon this posture. As a candidate she quietly acknowledged this fact. She broke with the tradition of German candidates for chancellor and avoided coming to Washington. She did not want to be seen as preparing to change German policy towards Iraq. She did not make foreign policy a campaign issue. When Chancellor Schröder challenged her during the TV debate, she tried to change the subject. Flash polls evaluated this segment of the debate: Schröder came out ahead by a margin of 81 to 17.

The factors that drive public perceptions remain in place today: President George Bush continues to be unpopular. His standing among the German public seems virtually beyond repair. The ongoing Iraq war supplies the German public with a steady diet of pictures that show death. It reminds them of the reasons why they objected to the war in the first place. The ongoing debate about prisoner abuse, torture, and secret CIA-prisons in Europe continues to undermine America's moral stature in Germany and, thus, its ability to lead. As long as these factors remain in place, large portions of the public will watch Chancellor Merkel's demeanor vis-a-vis the United States closely. She will have to counter the impression of "blind obedience," as the Adenauer Foundation's Karl-Heinz Kamp puts it. This segment of the public will look toward the Social Democrats to safe guard Chancellor Schröder's foreign policy legacy. In sum, Chancellor Merkel will need a lot of sensitivity to get this one right.

3. The new personnel

Angela Merkel grew up in a religious household in East Germany. She has a PhD in the natural sciences and worked as a scientist until shortly before the fall of the Wall. The democracy movement which she joined brought her into politics. During her 15 years in politics, she has seldom dealt with foreign policy. She first learned about the international arena in 1994 when she became Minister for Environmental Protection in Helmut Kohl's Cabinet. A wider foreign policy agenda became part of her portfolio when she assumed the role of party chair in 2000.

While there is no long paper trail about her foreign policy positions, it is possible to discern some basic convictions from her life in East Germany. She grew up under authoritarian rule and Soviet occupation. In short, she knows why she speaks Russian and why Vladimir Putin speaks German. He was stationed only a few hundred kilometers from her home – as a KGB officer. Judging from her background, it is extremely unlikely that she will see as close a partner in Russia or as close a friend in President Putin as her predecessor did. It is harder to get a read on her personal perspective on the United States. Dissidents in Soviet-occupied Central and Eastern Europe looked to the United States as a potential liberator; East Germans looked across the wall to their West German brethren. This difference helps to explain policy attitudes even today. Yet Angela Merkel has shown a remarkable interest in and openness towards the United States. To use Secretary Rumsfeld's parlance: she is as much "New Europe" as one would find in Germany. Furthermore, her foreign policy advisors are traditional West German Atlanticists, Wolfgang Schäuble and Friedbert Pflüger being the most important among

them.

Angela Merkel has built a career on being underestimated. She has shown astonishing staying power and political toughness. She perseveres. It is likely that her foreign policy agenda is genuine and unlikely that the special constraints of this Grand Coalition will cause her to give up the core of that agenda.

Frank-Walter Steinmeier, her designated foreign minister, is an unknown quantity in German foreign policy. For the past six years he has been Gerhard Schröder's chief of staff. He rose through the ranks of the state administration in Lower Saxony and was never elected to public office. He came to Berlin with Chancellor Schröder. Steinmeier has an unassuming personality and an excellent reputation as a manager of the daily business of running a government. Even conservatives praise him and feel confident that they can work with him. They see him as a pragmatist. He is closely associated with Chancellor Schröder's agenda for economic reform, but not with his foreign policy agenda. To many observers his ascension to the most important cabinet post came as a surprise.

Public knowledge about Steinmeier's foreign policy thinking is scant. However, his few public remarks show a man who does not think about foreign policy merely in terms of traditional diplomacy. He is concerned with the structural changes of the international environment in the age of globalization: ethnic and religious violence, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, asymmetric threats, rogue and failing states, demography, immigration, non-state actors. We have hints about Steinmeier's mindset, but not about his answers to his own questions.

4. Challenges for US Foreign Policy

The question that many in Washington foreign policy circles ask is this: If Schröder was the problem, is Merkel the solution? There are other questions. For example, how does one deal with a new government that seems to downplay the changes that it wants to implement?

Inevitably, foreign partners of this new German government will have to know about and accept its basic parameters to be able to do business with it. First of all, it is only half new. To yield to the temptation of working with the new part and ignoring the old will create problems rather than solutions. From an American perspective, the need to win over Social Democrats has not changed. Once they are won over, Chancellor Merkel can avoid the impression of subservience to America (which outcome should be very much in the American interest).

It will be hard or impossible for the United States to make progress on two fronts: Turkey and Iraq. The former because the coalition is divided about strategy; the latter because the coalition is united about strategy. On Turkish EU-membership the coalition will not want to reevaluate its decision not to decide what its position is. On Iraq, it represents the German consensus not to get involved militarily.

Actually, this coalition offers the opportunity to finally move beyond Iraq. The new coalition will not want to use cooperation on Iraq as a barometer to measure the quality of German-American relations. Given the history of the past few years, this new government will be eager to find new areas of cooperation.

Angela Merkel is more than she seems -- just as this new government. It may appear to be quiet and soft-spoken, but it has a foreign policy agenda. And that agenda has Washington at its top.Given the constraints of a grand coalition, that is an opening.